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Soviet Freeze Warning

A new, still-secret consensus among U.S. intelligence agencies, following months of bitter dispute, that the Soviet Union has deployed almost 200 mobile intercontinental missiles in violation of the SALT II treaty terms both countries are thought to be abiding by undercuts politicians trying to cash in on the nuclear freeze frenzy.

If President Reagan decides to let the American people in on the confidential finding of his top intelligence advisers and explains its disturbing implications, it might end the battle in Congress and his own administration over how Reagan should accommodate politically to the freeze movement without getting caught by Moscow in a freeze trap. The Soviet action on mobile ICBMs makes talk of an unverifiable freeze both ludicrous and dangerous.

On Friday afternoon, March 26, Secretary of State Alexander Haig overcame contentious White House political aides in persuading the president not to endorse any form of nuclear "freeze." At his press conference five days later, Reagan applauded Sens. Henry M. Jackson and John Warner for their resolution calling for "sharply reduced levels," but carefully avoided endorsing their freeze.

But before March 26 and even up to the press conference, White House aides, including chief of staff James Baker III, tried to change the president's mind on the freeze by leaks and private hints to the press. Called "the populists" by national security advisers because of their reliance on public opinion polls in determining foreign policy, these White House aides may display more fortitude with word of the Soviet violation of the SALT II prohibition of mobile ICBMs.

The new consensus that close to 200 SS16 ICBMs have been "fully deployed" in the area of a Soviet test range called Plesetsk, near Arkhangel, ends months—perhaps even several years—of disagreement in the U.S. government. Analysts of the CIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, the National Security Agency and other intelligence units have pondered hard and long whether the Kremlin could so blatantly be violating the treaty signed by presidents Jimmy Carter and Leonid Brezhnev, but not ratified by the U.S. Senate.

Now, however, evidence of actual deployment of the world's first mobile ICBM (a counterpart of the intermediate-range SS20 with an extra rocket stage and a single one-megaton warhead) is incontrovertible. The dread 6,000-nautical-mile missiles, housed in and fired from huge, wheeled vehicles capable of rapid movement, are concealed under elaborate camouflage.

The fact that competing U.S. intelligence agencies took several years to establish a consensus on SS16 deployment points up the danger of a nuclear freeze not accompanied by airtight—that is, on-site—inspection methods to verify Soviet compliance. Yet, the Soviets won't accept on-site inspection by Western or neutral specialists aimed at preventing deployment of such weapons as the SS16, while the world's most open society remains unable to keep any secrets at all.

Given the Soviet record of clandestine production of a vast array of nuclear missiles, submarines and other weapons that suddenly show themselves to the world without warning, critics view any nuclear freeze without ironclad verification of compliance as dangerously mischievous for the United States.

But Reagan advisers not blinded by narrow political considerations believe a nuclear freeze would offer an opportunity for the Soviets to steal another march on the United States, exploiting the freeze to produce new, more lethal weapons while the U.S. government was shackled by the freeze.

If they get their way, these advisers will convince Reagan that Soviet deployment of the banned SS16 should be shouted from the rooftops to persuade the American people to oppose premature dreams of disarmament.

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